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THE ALTENBURG CASE

By GEORGE DYRE ELDRIDGE

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(Continued.)

"Because I had promised him not to tell, and before I got here, after the death, Mr. Trafford had taken possession of that part of the house, and I was afraid if I told him that it would bring us all into more trouble than we were already in."

"Yes, but," urged Horace, "you did tell me that there was money, and in my first interview with Trafford I told him. I couldn't tell him, though, where it had been kept, and naturally, when he found the place he must have thought my ignorance queer, and it could not rouse his suspicions."

"If that was the only thing you did at that interview to arouse his suspicions," interrupted Beckwith, "you might rest a good deal easier than I think you have occasion to. Besides, it's a new tack for you to take, to be anxious because you have aroused Trafford's suspicions. It has occurred to me at times that you were something of an expert in doing just that thing." Then he turned to Mrs. Calden and went on:

"Who did the work on the vault? There must have been a good deal." "So far as I know he must have done it, and done it before I came here. He always was a great hand ever since I can remember to potter around with carpentering, bricklaying and such things. I think he had the door and frame, which are of iron, set into the brickwork, shipped here, for I remember when I first came seeing a crate in the barn that was just about right to hold them."

"I wonder what Trafford has done about it since he took possession of that part of the house," Beckwith mused, as to himself rather than to the others.

"I don't know. I haven't seen the keys, and nobody has asked about them or the room. Those two rooms have been closed up, you know, except when Mr. Trafford or his men were there at work or looking around. Perhaps it would have been better if I had spoken of this before."

"Oh, you needn't be alarmed," said Horace, bitterly. "They've had bricklayers there, and I'll bet torn the room all to pieces. I'll warrant you they've found the vault, the money and the papers."

"I'm inclined to think with you, Mrs. Calden," said Beckwith, "that it would have been far better if you had spoken of this at once; at least, if you had taken my advice as your counsel; but that is of the past and can't be remedied now, though I'd have liked to have had the advantage of showing Trafford our confidence by giving him a thing of this kind. Undoubtedly he has discovered the vault long since, and I'm free to say that I don't like the look of it that he has kept the matter quiet. I'll have to find some way to take it up with him, for we've got to know just what he has found there. Of course there's room in one of those old chimney stacks almost for a stable, let alone a vault six by eight feet, and, of course, he had the chimney front cut into as soon as he saw that there was only a make-believe fireplace."

"On whose authority?" demanded Horace.

"A search warrant issued by a judge on a certificate from Trafford that it was necessary to the people's proof. I could have opposed it, of course, but I would have put us in rather a queer position. I thought, on the whole, it was better to let it go by default, and I still think I was right."

"But if they got their hands on fifty thousand in money," Horace began, only to be interrupted by Beckwith:

"They haven't. If they'd found the money I'd have been notified at once. It's the fact that they haven't found it that they are counting on as significant, and that is making them keep the whole matter from me. Still, there's a chance here to be improved. I've been wondering how I'd open up on Trafford. This gives me the chance!"

"On Trafford?" exclaimed Horace. "How do you mean 'open up on' him?" "I mean just this. Trafford's working to find the murderer of John Altenburg. So we have. He can't want him half so badly as we do. I purpose getting to work with him at the earliest moment possible. It's hurt him that we weren't working with him before, but it's hurt us a thundering sight more."

Mrs. Calden grew pale as she listened to Beckwith, and he saw her press her hand over her heart, as if to stop its fluttering. The lawyer took pity on her.

"It isn't knowledge, it's ignorance we've got to be afraid of, madam," he said.

Beckwith kept his eyes steadfastly on Trafford's face while he was speaking and seemed in no hurry to answer when the lawyer was done. After a pause of some duration he said:

"I am just studying what possible advantage you think to gain by this method. Of course you have no expectation of being compelled to take the position you outline in court, for if you do you would not weaken the effect by warning me in advance. At the same time, I can't accept it that you are saying this just for the sake of saying something to cover your perplexity, for you don't do things that way. I admit I don't just see your game, especially as you know that I am no boy, to do things in a boy's way, or to be daunted by an impressive or dictatorial manner. Where I need corroboration I generally have it. Have you anything further to say?"

"That I shall apply to the court for the order concerning the money and papers."

Trafford took a turn up and down the office. Then he came back to Beckwith's desk.

"I don't mind saying," he explained, "that at this time such an application would embarrass me a great deal. Possibly that is the whole explanation of

said. "We've never really succeeded in hiding anything from him, but he knows lots that we want to know, that we have, in fact, got to know."

The result of the consultation was that a letter was sent to Trafford that very afternoon, calling upon him, in the name of the heirs of John Altenburg, whom Beckwith represented, to pay into court any money that had been found in the searching the house, and to deposit in court all papers discovered and in his possession. It had the effect of bringing Trafford to Beckwith's office within an hour of its receipt.

"Are the people coming to your senses at last?" he asked, tapping the envelope containing the notice, which he held in his hand.

Beckwith looked his irritation at the mood of salute and his want of comprehension of the question.

"I think fifty thousand dollars too large a sum to be lying around loose," he said, "and while I've refrained from demanding possession of it ourselves, as I had a perfect right to do, I see no reason why it shouldn't be turned over to the court."

"You know," he said, "that if we'd found money or papers the court would have received them without your having to send this notice."

"But you've broken through the chimney breast into the vault. There were fifty thousand dollars there at the time of the murder."

"Then it's been taken away since," said Trafford, positively, "for there was not a dollar in the vault when we reached it, nor anything else excepting a mass of rubbish, some old tin boxes, some paper scraps and that's all."

"And what?" demanded Beckwith. He was looking coldly across his desk full in the face of Trafford, with that steady, dominating look that had faced down opponents and prosecuting officers, even judges. It was said, "And what?" he repeated.

"Mr. Beckwith," said Trafford, neither countenance nor tone changing in the slightest, "what is your interest, or that of your clients, in this matter?"

To discover the murderer of John Altenburg or to shield him?"

"You scarcely deserve an answer," exclaimed Beckwith. "It is to find the murderer, and at the earliest possible moment."

"Then let me for the present keep the answer to your question a secret, even from the county attorney. When it will be of use to that end I'll make it."

The two men sat in awkward silence under the keen sense of being thwarted which possessed Beckwith, and the equally keen sense on Trafford's part that it had been a mistake to bring matters to the point where he felt compelled openly to thwart the other. Trafford was the first to speak again.

"How close to the night of the murder does your knowledge of the money being in the vault come?"

There, as Beckwith of course understood, was the fatal weakness of their position. Mrs. Calden did not even know that there had been any money there. She had simply taken Altenburg's word for it, at a time when he was anxious to make her think there was money there, as a means to inducing her to make the promise. Even her slight shred of evidence did not come nearer the time of the murder than several months.

"You know whether the vault had been recently disturbed," said Beckwith, without in the least refusing an answer, "and you know whether there was money or papers there when you reached the vault. There may be vital questions to us in our position, which your course of procedure has made it impossible for us to ascertain for ourselves. We are driven to rest on your word."

"I invited confidence," replied Trafford, "and was met by the same evasions that you are still pursuing. You are hardly justified in complaining of a situation of your own creating."

"I give you notice now," said Beckwith, "that if you attempt to use anything connected with that vault against a client of mine, I shall not hesitate to attack your testimony and you, on the ground that you had no right to enter there save in the presence of some representatives of the heirs, and that your testimony is prejudiced and distorted for a purpose. I shall not expect, as a matter of course, to exclude the testimony by such a course as this, but I shall confidently expect to discredit it, so as to reduce its effect very materially. I shall also demand corroboration of the fact that there was no money or papers there when you entered it."

Trafford kept his eyes steadfastly on Beckwith's face while he was speaking and seemed in no hurry to answer when the lawyer was done. After a pause of some duration he said:

"I am just studying what possible advantage you think to gain by this method. Of course you have no expectation of being compelled to take the position you outline in court, for if you do you would not weaken the effect by warning me in advance. At the same time, I can't accept it that you are saying this just for the sake of saying something to cover your perplexity, for you don't do things that way. I admit I don't just see your game, especially as you know that I am no boy, to do things in a boy's way, or to be daunted by an impressive or dictatorial manner. Where I need corroboration I generally have it. Have you anything further to say?"

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a course on your part that seems to me inexplicable. I've my witness to the condition of the vault. Beyond him no one knows even of its existence. I won't say that one of my objects hasn't been accomplished to-day in discovering that knowledge of the vault did exist among the group for which you stand. I'm not asking which of the group knew. Knowledge on the part of some one is all I care for at this moment, and up to this moment I could only guess that such knowledge existed. Still that's not all I'm keeping the matter as I am for. I am willing to bring my witness to you quietly to corroborate what I have said."

"I never felt more like kicking a man in my life than I do like kicking you at this moment," exclaimed Beckwith. "Do you think if your word wasn't good enough for me personally I'd take it on the backing of somebody you'd produce in this way? I'm not questioning now what you've said; I'm taking steps to make it a matter of record in the case."

"You have, then, definitely made up your mind to interfere instead of acting in co-operation with me?"

"Your idea of co-operation seems highly original. While asking it, and complaining that it is not granted, you are setting a trap to catch the very ones whose confidence you pretend to seek."

"Let me point out that evasions did not begin with me. Your clients were asked to work with me, and it was not until they refused that I even thought of them as hostile."

"That sounds familiar," said Beckwith, "only as boys we didn't waste words. We just said 'You're another.'"

Trafford smiled.

"Who's laying a trap now? Well, I walk into it with eyes open. I've seen from the start, as a blind man must have, that if young Calden did the killing he couldn't be afraid that his father did it, and that if the father did it he couldn't think his son guilty. What I haven't seen and what I don't see yet is, what are or may be the relations of these two toward the actual murderer. I can't tell you his name or put my hand on him, but there's his handwriting." With that he threw on the table the note of appointment found on Altenburg's desk.

"Is this what you found in the vault?" asked Beckwith.

"No. That I still keep covered for the present."

"Hello!" exclaimed Beckwith, genuine surprise sounding in his tone. "Did this man keep this appointment?"

"That's what I want your help in finding out. The Caldens spent Tuesday night in the Altenburg house, arriving after dark. They would naturally be on the alert for any kind of

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danger and ought to know whether Altenburg had any visitors that night. I want you to take up that line. Since that first day they've been about as much with me as young Calden's been with his own lawyers."

"Whoever it was," mused Beckwith, keeping his eyes on the note and utterly ignoring Trafford's hit, now that he had really something more important than bickering with the detective, "he seems to have been posted about family affairs. He'd been here before, and they had some 'usual' place of meeting, away from the house. That was because 'she' was there. Now 'she' is gone it's all right for him to come to the house. Ergo, as we used to say at the academy, when we wanted to be particularly impressive, she probably would know him by sight. Isn't it possible she'd know the handwriting?" and he glanced for the first time toward Trafford.

The detective smiled. This was the kind of thing he enjoyed, and enjoyed in another as he would in himself. Indeed, he felt that he was setting the aid of a keen mind in helping to read the riddle, and he was not in the least ashamed to avail himself of the help and to acknowledge having done so.

"Possible? Yes," he said, "I scarcely think probable, however. More likely that Calden might."

"Hold on!" said Beckwith, raising his hand to stop him. "There's something there. Just what is it? Here, how's this? He hasn't come to the house because 'she' is there; he proposes to come now that 'she' is gone. When he went Altenburg had a telephone put in the house. He clearly regarded it as a protection. Then it must have been a protection against something that became threatening by reason of her absence. Of course, she was no protection to him against physical force. She was, evidently, a protection against this visitor coming to the house. But Altenburg wasn't afraid to meet him elsewhere, for they had a 'usual' place of meeting. Was there something at the house that this man wanted and that Altenburg didn't want him to have? If so, was it kept in the vault, and was it the money or papers, or both?"

"It's clear," answered Trafford, "that the visitor is some one who knows, but how much does he know? Clearly, it would seem, that he knows that 'she' isn't Altenburg's wife. But if so, the knowledge must date back to a time prior to Altenburg's coming here."

Beckwith looked up with a sudden smile.

"I don't mind telling you," he said, "that to-day I advised my clients to take you into partnership. I can't give you better evidence of my sincerity than by telling you that the name of

the writer of this is Clayton; that he is the only person besides Altenburg who actually knew who robbed and ruined the Venezuela Syndicate, and that he's probably lived by blackmail on our estimate late deceased."

"All the information that I can get," responded Trafford, "points to the conclusion that Clayton is dead."

"Yes," said Beckwith, with no quiver of an eyelid to show to what extent he was surprised by Trafford's play, "in some out-of-the-way place—South America, Central Africa—"

"Australia. I've sent there for definite information. Their records of deaths, births, etc., are among the best in the world."

"You've got a better certificate here than Australia can produce," said Beckwith, taking up the note again, "and I don't care what their system may be. If they send a certificate of death, as they probably will, here's a certificate of life that I'd stake against it every time. Let's take it to Calden."

"I don't care to show too much of my hand," said Trafford, "I've made some photographs, and the first lines will live enough for identification of the handwriting without revealing the whole. I'm willing to show him these."

They went together to the jail, and Calden for the first time met Beckwith and Trafford. The latter studied him with keen watchfulness, setting his first personal impressions of a man whom he felt it his duty to protect against himself, if it were not his duty to do his best to convict him of murder.

After some conversation Beckwith handed him the photographs, with the careless question:

"Don't you happen to know that handwriting, Mr. Calden?"

Calden glanced at his eye fell on the paper. Almost a flush of hope seemed to fit across his face, which fell again under a sudden cloud. He did not answer directly, but asked:

"Was that written recently?"

"Within a month, as we judge," answered Beckwith.

Calden sighed as he continued:

"Once that would have been the best news that I could possibly receive. Now it doesn't matter. It's too late!"

"But do you know the handwriting?" asked Beckwith, a little impatiently.

"Oh, I beg pardon," he said. "I wasn't so engrossed in what might have been that I forgot the actual situation and thought I had answered. It's the writing of a man of the name of Clayton."

Noah Clayton, who was a confidential

(Continued on Page 15.)



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